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NOTES AND SUGGESTIONS

A CAUTION REGARDING MILITARY DOCUMENTS

IN view of the interest in the study of military history evidenced by floods of divisional or regimental histories and more pretentious accounts of American military operations it may be timely to suggest to the historical student certain characteristics of military documents that necessitate the application to them of the most careful critique. Indeed, when the official character of a military document is established, the task of the student is only begun. He has further to learn the circumstances under which the document was produced; he has to estimate the character and reliability of the information on which it was based, the possible motives of its framers for concealment or modification of the truth as they knew it. He has further to consider whether the application of a critique in the framing of his document may not have made a secondary account of what purports to be a source. All these inquiries, it is true, have normally to be made with respect to any documents; for military documents, they must be most searching.

An illustration will make this apparent. The documents from which we would seek to learn the position of the front line held by a unit on a given day would be a body of reports, probably those from corps or division to higher authority. These reports would be based on reports from brigades, the brigade reports on regimental reports, regimental reports on battalion reports, battalion reports on company reports, company reports on platoon reports. The platoon commander, as the original source of information, perhaps in fading daylight or early dawn, perhaps in a dense forest where no landmarks are available, possibly subject to a stinging fire if he climbs a knoll to look about him, must determine his position as best he may. This done, perhaps with a very hazy knowledge of map reading, he sends back what he guesses are the map coordinates of his position. If, as may easily happen, neither he nor his company commander has been able to look at a map for more than five minutes, he sends a rough position sketch only. His company commander, battalion commander, regimental commander, each corrects the data in the light of what seems to him more authentic information. Each may use reports of scout officers, reports from officers who have been

part way up to the front, reports more or less confused by officers and men who have come back wounded; possibly a calculus of probabilities based on the report of some neighboring unit that it occupies such and such map coordinates and is ahead of, or abreast of, his own. If runner or phone communication is uncertain he is most likely to use the supplementary information indicated rather than attempt to verify the original report. Accordingly a document that at first sight appears to be a source may well be a source plus a critique, the value of which depends on the skill or information of the officers who have applied it.

That such critiques may be extremely inaccurate in their results any officer can testify who knows the degree of exact information normally in possession of rear posts of command during an engagement. Despite all protests a unit is ordered to occupy a given trench, being assured it is vacant. It obeys orders and pays in casualties for the knowledge that the information on which the order was based was, to speak mildly, inaccurate. Information reaches a unit that men in a given position are Americans when the men commanding the unit are morally certain the men in question are enemies, as later experience proves. Within the writer's own experience is an order to an officer in charge of combat train based on the supposition that the American troops had taken Fismes, and Fismettes, its suburb north of the Vesle, and that he would find his commanding officer in Fismettes, the enemy supposedly being fast retiring on all sides. In fact, the officer was held up on the road some five miles from his objective by heavy enemy fire and on parking the train in safety and exploring for his unit found it not a quarter of a mile away from his train-park but very far from the position he had been assured it occupied.

Furthermore, the student of military operations must remember that a document is not always compiled under the circumstances in which it purports to be. Documents prescribed by army regulations to be compiled from day to day and supposedly a contemporary record of events may be, and often are, in reality, compiled months after the events, often by people who have had no part in them. A typical case is the war diary prescribed to be kept on campaigns by battalions and larger units and containing a brief account of operations, positions held, etc. At first sight, such a document might seem a contemporary record. In one case that came under the writer's observation, and in many of which he has heard, such diaries have been compiled months at a time by adjutants and sergeant-majors with no personal experience in the events and from miscellaneous

information, adjustments, and guess work. Here again, what seems to be a pure source is in reality one with much added critique.

To a less degree, the same applies to orders, to training orders, and to drill schedules especially. In many instances such documents are compiled for the benefit of higher authority as much as for guides to performance. They are subject to interruption, to being practically disregarded by officers in command of troops with a tacit connivance of superiors, etc. Often they may represent in but a small degree the actual training that a unit receives.

Understanding of the degree of reliability attaching to military documents is common property among the more intelligent officers and men. Even in popular regimental and divisional histories that have recently appeared, the authors, though not trained historians, often instinctively control documentary information by information received from participants while the events were still fresh in mind. The trained historian likewise must bear in mind that the military document is often a meaningless formulary, or, worse still, has an interpretation written into it. To comprehend the formula, or to separate source and interpretation, he has no better recourse than to the narrative of the eye-witness whether in diary or letter written while the facts were fresh in mind and when hasty first impressions had been corrected in the light of fuller information. In such narratives personal bias is more easily detected than in impersonally couched official reports; and where the use of several such narratives is possible the personal element may be in great measure eliminated. Such material of course cannot supersede the document; at best it can but assist in the divesting of the source from the interpretation or give warning that the document is so corrupted or so remote from the actual occurrences it purports to describe that it should be altogether rejected.

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